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The Social Sea around Us

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## *The Social Sea around Us*

It is true only in a loose and dangerous way of talking that the school is a reflection of society. If the school is only a reflection of something, it is pointless for educators or parents to get together to talk about school.

But if it is not true that the school is merely a reflection, neither is it true that the school is wholly independent. The school, like other institutions, has the rest of the world for its setting, and from time to time the setting needs to be re-examined.

The educator must be especially concerned with the world in which he lives. For as the world changes, the limitations within which and the opportunities on which the school acts also change. Then, too, the world is part of the subject matter of the educator—the very subject he is supposed to be describing to his students. Finally, only an examination of the world as it now is will give any clues to the world as it will be when the students come into the management of it. It is for this task that school is their preparation. The only sound foundation for that preparation is a realistic appreciation of how things are and some best guess as to how they will be.

The educator who is pressed to look out, clear-eyed, on the world for the sake of his students runs a considerable risk in doing so. He may be so appalled at what he sees, so frightened by the chaos and uncertainty, that he may lose whatever capacity he has to act from day to day on small problems. Every educator must decide for himself whether he will run this risk and whether he can, in con-

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science, encourage his students to do so if he himself is not willing. For those who care to go forward, I have sketched a view of how the world now presents itself to the educator, together with some reflection on the lines of action still open to him.

It is hard to decide whether an age is best characterized by its words or its works, its philosophy or its action. Since change in one is shortly reflected by change in the other, perhaps it does not matter which we examine first. Let us take our first glance at philosophy.

Insofar as the modern world, in the West at least, can be said to have any philosophy, explicit or implicit, four great contenders seem to speak for it. Dominant are the voices of pragmatism, existentialism, nihilism, and neo-orthodoxy: philosophies respectively of adjustment, despair with courage, mere despair, and retreat. In spite of differences in underlying dogma, the great new nations, the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R., exemplify the first. The tired, old, and most civilized nation represents the second. The third and fourth are the comfort of only a marginal coterie. Certainly pragmatism is a philosophy suited to activity; indeed, it almost makes of activity the beginning and end, the alpha and omega of value, and hence it is ideally suited to the needs of two blind giants making their way to cataclysmic collision. All the contending philosophies clearly represent bankruptcy and despair; pragmatism merely obscures the sad future in technical preoccupation with the present.

What has brought us to this state? How is the sun gone out of heaven and light from the life of man? The story is a long one and perhaps already well known. People now living have witnessed the collapse and rout of not one but two vast structures that supported and justified the whole Western way of life. First, the traditional, sacred, and transcendent ways of describing and justifying life that nourished, succored, and sustained men from the beginning of our civilization to pre-modern times were broken open under the onrush of science. Second, the pre-modern philosophy itself—rational, secu-

lar, optimistic, evolutionary, and centered on the religion of progress—was shaken to its foundations by the contradiction of its prophecies. What remained in our century of the belief in inevitable (or even probable) human progress the first World War shook and later crises demolished. Not only human beings, but beliefs too were cremated at Buchenwald and annihilated at Hiroshima. What is even now tested and proved at Cape Canaveral is not only missiles but men—men in their organized, technological capacity to co-operate in the destruction of one another.

Whatever else an educator must face, he must confront his inability to transmit to his charges any meaningful value system that will be valid in the long run. He must learn to recognize that this impotence is due not to some special defect in him or them, but to the human condition at this instant or perhaps to the human condition as it may be forever.

Not only must the educator confront this central fact, but he must confront the fact that, whether or not his students can put into words what they feel, they already perceive or feel the fateful vacuum in and around them. They already act in the face of the facts—with anger and aggression in the blackboard jungle and with a more polite sabotage of self and society in the new suburbias.

The only weapon that will not serve in this conjuncture is pretense—pretense at a vision we do not as yet have, pretense at holding an older faith, on which we no longer act because we no longer can. It is useless, too, to absorb ourselves in the game of “Blame? Blame? Who’s to blame?” Mutual recrimination between generations, between home and school, or even between proponents of various political and educational views are all profitless. The differences that divide us are pygmies compared to the giant dangers we confront together.

The expression of this view comes close to a declaration of bankruptcy. In the absence of a commanding philosophy or a gripping religion, all education is carpentry—shoring up a defect here (“we

need more scientists and engineers”), putting in a window there (“we must have public financing of the education of select students”), but incoherent, planless, defensive, *ad hoc*. To go beyond carpentry, we need architecture; but architecture presupposes purpose; and purpose, in any wide or great sense, we do not have.

It is easy, all too easy, to say: If what you point out is true, let’s give our students the tools and teach them the facts and leave the rest to fate or fortune. But what the facts are—as well as any answer to the question what facts are worth transmitting—depends on the whole nexus of patterns and meanings, which is what we mean by a *value system*. And a coherent, relevant, credible value system is exactly what we lack.

What is likely to happen under such circumstances is what is indeed already happening. Since we must act, even if we do not know what we want or ought to want, we may try to organize to act against what we do not want. We clearly do not want, for instance, to be defeated militarily or politically by the Soviet bloc. Where we can think of no positive worthwhile aims, we may (and we seem to be increasingly and successfully so doing) elect to mobilize, individually and collectively, for this one negative objective. We are thus at least released into action; and our problems become not humane, philosophical, and ethical, but organizational and technical. Unfortunately, as the process continues, the dissimilarities between the two camps diminish. The disappearance of vital differences, however, by no means necessarily puts an end to rivalry. Witness George Orwell’s *1984*.

For those—may they be many!—for whom a purely or primarily negative program is insufficient, we may ask: What may we as educators realistically hope to do?

Perhaps we may assume, without real warrant, that what we are witnessing is not the inevitable collapse of civilization, but merely a most ominous time of troubles. If so, the problem is to live through it, carrying forward the remnants and memories of the old values and more particularly the tools and the hopes for the as-yet-unseen new. Such a task requires the emergence of islands of intimacy and dedi-

cation—parallel perhaps to the monasteries of the Middle Ages—where, protected against the surrounding dark, the surviving lamps can be cherished, protected, and their illuminating capacity perhaps enhanced. Withdrawal to redoubts, where values can be cherished and preserved, is beginning to be visible here and there. The withdrawal may be seen, at a superficial level perhaps, in William H. Whyte's *Organization Man*, in the transfer of affect from state and job and politics, back to family and friends.

If we can think of nothing better, we may wish to assist in the preparations to live through another chapter in history that may deserve the label Dark Ages, a period in which a dedicated handful will preserve whatever is to be preserved. The first problem would be to find, select, and prepare this saving remnant, a difficult enough task for anyone, especially for the educator in a mass educational system!

Perhaps we should turn from so gloomy a conclusion, based on the bankruptcy of philosophy. What confronts us as we turn from the world of ideas to the world of reality?

Certainly, this is an age of giants: the leviathan state and the megapolitan city. Single, monolithic states now bind in tight embrace a population larger than that inhabiting the entire globe but a few centuries ago. Single cities now comprise a population greater than the population of the mighty nations that ushered in our era. Ours is an age in which man in the singular is dwarfed by man in the plural; man in his individuality, by man in his collectivity. Ours is a world of such speed and scale as men never knew and rarely dreamed.

It is a world filled with wonders, wonderless and disenchanted. It is a world of problems solved not matters meditated, and the problems raise new problems, and the wonders call out fresh wonders. One day a gasoline engine coughs in a little center near the Detroit River; the next, cars choke the road, and airplanes fill the sky. Yesterday, a mere Sputnik; today, a moon-probe; tomorrow. . . .

It is a world urbanized, almost to its last acre and farthest reach. Indeed, it is almost one vast city, *urbs et orbis* no longer distinguishable entities. For what is not city is already citified or by way of being so, as the giant networks of transportation and communication make distance almost trivial and location almost irrelevant.

It is a world then of vast and complex organization, a world in which effective action is possible only because of what one is. Who one is, is known only or primarily by one's role or function. It is indeed the age of the Organization Man. Men have always belonged to organizations in the sense that they have adhered to them; they now belong almost in the sense in which medieval man conceived that he belonged to God—perhaps for the same reason: that theirs is now the kingdom and the power and the glory.

It is a world of bureaucratization. More and more, in his life as a producer, man finds himself acting on rule, efficient and impersonal. He serves as a lieutenant (literally a *placeholder*) in an office, related to other officers in a hierarchy inside, and to a public that is impersonal, undifferentiated, and faceless outside. In his role as a consumer he simply moves from one side of the counter to the other, becoming part of the nameless public to some other bureaucrat. But what he has learned on one side of the counter cannot be used to make life less distressing on the other. On both sides, he feels like a cork abob in a moving sea.

It is a world of secularization and scientization, to coin a horrible word, where nothing is any longer sacred and all is material for the mandibles of science. Mystery becomes only a name for what we do not yet know and hence ceases to be mystery. The only mystery that remains is why we have chosen (if we can be said to have chosen at all) so to structure or perceive or conceive our world and whether we can find sustenance and, given our nature, survive in this world. The scientific eye, which has seen through the microscopic curtain and scanned the heavens, is now turned by man upon man himself. Whether he will be able to bear what he sees or how he will integrate

what he discovers with what he *is*—these are and must be open questions.

Partly as a consequence of vast organization with its needs and partly as an outcome of enlarged science with its powers, ours has become an age of deprivatization. The veil that guards the dual privacy of each man from himself and each and all from others is irreparably sundered. What the Gallup polls cannot tell us, the old-style personality tests can, and what these cannot, the projective and situational tests can. And, failing these, we have narcoanalysis, the electroencephalograph, the lie detector, and the interview in depth.

As a consequence of these and other changes, ours is a world of centralization, where effective power not only concentrates in ever fewer hands but reaches to heights undreamt of and depths unplumbed: thought control in one part of the world and mood engineering in the other; the open persuaders there and the hidden persuaders here; little is left to chance, spontaneity, variance, taste, life. And over all hangs the potential of atomic annihilation, and this danger, by the very speed of decision it demands, virtually necessitates one finger on the trigger, one voice at each critical instant to say yea or nay. Even the ancient myths of national sovereignty, still heavily loaded with feeling, must give way before the iron necessities of the facts. Can power be more concentrated than in a day when one or two men, or even a handful, can probably say for the species or perhaps for all living forms, “Live” or “Die”?

Ours is a world not only of change but of a transience so rapid that phenomena are—not merely in the long cast of philosophic thought, under the canopy of eternity, but immediately, here and now, in the everyday given-ness of life—ephemeral, evanescent. Even in material things—in so-called durable goods—duration is unendurable, and we now have obsolescence planned and built in. In ideas, today’s discovery is tomorrow’s cliché, and an insatiable press uses every innovation it can make comprehensible to sensation-loving readers, who have been made sensation-loving, even as they are numbed, in the swirl of that tireless output. In values . . . But this is the problem with which we began.



Man, the individual, stands thus at mid-century looking one way to a series of monoliths, the other to an infinitude of unrelated fragments. As he seeks to act on the world, the monoliths—giant state, business monopoly, gigantic union—confront and prevent his effectiveness. As he seeks to gather meaning, organization, value, or strength out of his experience, he encounters a sea of meaningless, disjointed pieces. Small wonder then if, doubting his potency, he lends increased facility and necessity to the very processes that render him without power!

Against these telling, tolling signs, what has modern man to set? Material abundance for all? On the horizon, certainly, if we can limit the blind multiplication of the species. Material power? Yes: power now reaching out beyond the globe to tap on the very firmament itself. Swiftly multiplying knowledge? Quite surely. Possible permanent relief from drudgery both physical and intellectual by way of automation and the automated production of automation? Yes, that too. Almost everything that man has dreamed of lies in his hand or just outside his grasp. Only the want of answers to two related questions threatens to snatch defeat from the very arms of victory: What of man himself? What for? His ultimate nature and his purpose—these still escape man's understanding, and the deficiency renders his triumphs empty and his victories pyrrhic.

And what, in such a world, can the educator do? The least he can do is try to see the world clearly. If he has the courage, he can let the child see something of how the world is, not in a children's version, but as he sees it. He can point to the search. He can even exemplify it. But he cannot lead the child into the promised land, for the dawn is not yet nor the sign of it nor even the direction known from which it is to come. So much at least he might communicate to his students.

A great deal of what has been said so far may seem a counsel of despair. It is just as foolish to despair prematurely as it is to hope inanely. Can we, without inanity, take more hopeful ground?

Curiously, one rational ground of hope—or at least one reason for

refusing full access to despair—lies in our knowledge of our ignorance. We now know with certainty, or so it seems, that we live only in a world of probabilities, that determinism in the nineteenth-century sense is an exploded myth. Even in physics, the seemingly safe domain of cause and effect, we now talk of probability distributions, one such distribution being succeeded by another—a very different picture from the neat “A causes B” science on which we grew up. In the social sciences, we have never got beyond dealing with probabilities and have not, hence, had the jolt of the physicists in renouncing comfortable certainty. Even in mathematics—the queen of sciences and the heartland of certainty—we may have to content ourselves with mere probabilistic statements. In at least one of its domains, number theory, where little progress has been made for a long time, some advance now seems possible if the demand for certainty is relaxed to a demand for a probability statement similar to those that we make in the concrete sciences.

Why should one say that such knowledge—knowledge which, if true, means that man is permanently condemned to lack of certainty and therefore, ultimately, ignorance—is ground for hope? I am not sure that one can really go so far. But one can surely argue without excessive optimism that a merely probabilistic universe, whatever emotions it may arouse as to its present state, does not justify despair as to its future. Despair requires certainty: certainty that hope is doomed to defeat. If certainty cannot be had—and it seems that even if we had full knowledge it cannot—then the future cannot be foreclosed on the basis of any knowledge of the present. Sobered we may be or worried or anxious: probability statements are, after all, statements of certainty on the average. But that final qualification should rule out hopelessness in its full impact.

It must be some such argument that justifies so clear-eyed, hard-headed, and knowledgeable a man as J. Robert Oppenheimer in a sort of limited optimism, even in the area immediately surrounding his specialty: international control of atomic energy. Only so can he, presumably, justify his logic in falling back, in the face of utter

defeat in the present, on the age-old sustaining view that something must be left to time and nature. See, for example, his famous essay, "The Open Mind" (2). Something must so be left indeed; but only because time and nature embody the very principle of the permanently uncertain future, which is, it now seems "certain," part of the ineluctable condition of man in nature.

When we say that something must be left to time and nature, we are referring clearly to the settlement of our state of hope, not to a principle of action. It is not, I take it, being suggested that men should abandon effort or their sense of agency and urgency simply because they recognize that the outcome of action cannot be fully foretold. At least, I hope that no such inference is being drawn. What, then, does this escape hatch from despair imply if it does not permit rest in faith?

It implies, I think, no more than a permissible escape into activity, secure that it is not patently pointless (though it may turn out to be so) nor inescapably futile (though it may turn out to be that). In the face of our circumstances, what activities might we think least surely foredoomed?

The first to come to mind—it goes back to the beginning of this article—is the philosophical or religious quest. The more obvious it becomes that every philosophy now extant, when driven to its logical conclusion, becomes either trivial or contradictory of what is solid in human experience, the more desperate becomes the need for a new philosophy. The more it becomes evident that no existing religion—or combination of them or variation on them—is even remotely likely to command universal assent or even to unify more than it divides mankind, the more urgent does the need of just such a religion become. But neither philosophies nor religions, if the lessons of history mean anything, can be ordered up at will. They cannot be constructed; they occur—like biological mutations in one terminology or the bestowal of grace in another. The most that can be done, if even so much can be done, is to provide the conditions under which

such occurrences seem likely. We shall speak further of these later.

The second activity to come to mind is the political quest, a quest that in this generation can hardly mean anything but the quest of peace. The power of modern weapons means that, failing peace, there will be no politics at all. There are no issues in graveyards. It goes without saying that the peace sought must indeed be peace with justice, for if non-peace implies death, peace without justice implies life not worth living. So we stand. I think we can count on it that the image of peace with justice wakes a responsive thrill in nearly every human breast. But we must also recognize that hardly anyone in power or in prospect of getting power sees a road to peace except through war or by means that almost certainly will bring about what they are designed to avoid.

Only as we are assured that every ounce of available energy is devoted to, and distributed between, these quests, the political and the religious, do other quests and searches make sense. The search for knowledge is idle if we do not know what to do with knowledge or if we can be confident that our civilization will be destroyed before we can use our knowledge. The amassing of more material goods has the same futility: all it can provide is an escape from living into a new sort of galloping consumption, consumption for the sake of consuming, consumption in which what is ultimately consumed is the zest of life itself.

Can educators as educators further these quests or educate persons for them? Even if they can, is it proper for them to do so? While I hold firmly to the view that the school is no place for propaganda, I also think it inevitable that the school in its every activity and in its totality implicitly answers the child's question: What in life is important? The child may refuse the answers the school gives, but he can scarcely fail to note them, inferring them, of course, less from what the school says than from what it is and does. This is, in fact, a propaganda of the act, but it cannot be avoided, nor should it.

If the most vital quests open to the child center on peace and purpose, what can the school do to prepare him? Certainly nothing

by adding more functions to an already overloaded institution, nor by adding more courses to an overdiversified and underorganized curriculum. We shall neither make nor encourage philosophers and politicians by adding lessons in philosophy or politics to the curriculum. But just as there is hardly a school subject that does not profitably lend itself to expanding the child's understanding of men and their motives, so also there is hardly a subject that does not raise or lead into philosophical or political questions or both. Whether we seek to convey insight into motives or to stimulate philosophical or political awareness, it is less a matter of adding subjects to be taught than one of enriching their contexts, so that lessons may be learned in their vital bearings. If this is not a program for all students, is it not part of the answer to that cry of despair: What shall we do with the gifted child? If he cannot or should not be pushed too far ahead of his contemporaries in subject matter, could he not, at least, be taught the same subjects in their bearing on the most urgent of contemporary problems?

But an address to the gifted alone is insufficient. What they can do, at best, in our kind of society is conditional upon, and limited by, what the less gifted (or otherwise gifted) will encourage, respond to, or permit. This brings us back to the question left unanswered earlier: What circumstances or conditions might reasonably be expected to encourage or further these quests? We cannot, I feel sure, produce leaders as many a textbook on leadership now recommends. But certain climates of feeling, valuation, and opinion seem to call out leaders. Is it not in such a climate that there arises a sense of vocation? When the sense of being lost is widespread and vivid, when the memory of what has been lost or what is yet to find lies close to every heart, when those who seek are respected and heard because they seek even when they do not find, when the sense of urgency is combined with the sense of imminence, when minds and hearts are open to hope but hardly dare, the climate is perhaps ripe for innovation and hence for at least one more chance for life. Can we encourage such a view? Should we? What other ground for

hope can we point to? What other promise worth pursuing can we hold out?

#### NOTES

1. The author has long been interested in mental health, education, and society. He directed the Forest Hill Village Project, a five-year project in action research carried out in a suburb of Toronto, Canada. During the study a number of experiments were carried on in the school system, among them a series of human-relations classes. The article presented here is based on a paper included in a kit that parents and teachers of Forest Hill Village had prepared for their annual staff-parent conference.

2. *The Open Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), chap. iii.